

Bedford tax rollback passes
By Jessica DeLeón

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BEDFORD - Although they were outspent 4-1, residents demanding a property tax rollback won by 10 votes Saturday, a triumph that will bring refunds to property owners and likely result in sharp cuts in city services and possible layoffs.

In a record 33 percent turnout, residents voted 4,929 to 4,919 for the measure, according to unofficial results.

"I feel it's a big win when you consider the odds that were against us," rollback supporter Bob Stewart said.

Members of the anti-rollback efforts were devastated by the results, standing in stunned silence as the numbers were announced at the Pat May Center and hugging each other in despair or frustration.

"Ten stinking votes," resident David Moon said. "Maybe we need a recount."

Mayor Rick Hurt said rollback opponents were contemplating asking for a recount, but he advised caution.

Although part of him wants to consider it, he said, "This city must heal."

If the tax rollback stands, the city's property tax rate will drop from 49.5 cents per \$100 of assessed property value to 40 cents. Property owners can expect to receive rebates. The owner of a \$150,000 house -- about the average price of a house in Bedford -- would save \$142.50 a year.

City officials say they will have to cut \$2.6 million out of the \$24.8 million general fund budget.

Election results will be canvassed March 14. City manager Chuck Barnett said he would make recommendations for cuts at council work sessions scheduled for March 18 and 19. The council would then have to amend the budget, possibly at a special meeting March 29.

Officials have said threatened items include Bedford Splash, the library and senior citizens center.

Hurt said he didn't know which services would go first, but he said he would try to protect public safety.

More than 100 employees may be laid off, officials have said. Jeanne Green, who works at the library, stood still in shock after the results were announced.

"This is awful," she said. "The city is going to die."

Rollback supporters disagreed. Throughout the campaign, they said the city was using scare tactics to stop a rollback.

"Nobody's going to lose their job," resident Ralph Good predicted. "There may be some adjustments."

The conflict began in September, after the council increased the property tax rate to fund 6 percent raises for employees, recruit eight police officers and order a new firetruck and ambulance. Saying the increase was too much in one year, a group of residents collected more than 5,200 signatures in December to force the rollback election.

The group, Bedford Citizens for Responsive Government, is made up of residents who had been active in previous city elections, most recently in unseating a council incumbent so the council would pass a property tax freeze for senior citizens and the disabled.

About the same time, a group called Moving Bedford Forward organized a grassroots effort to oppose the rollback. A third organization, the business-backed Committee to Save Bedford, raised more than \$30,000 for mailers.

During early voting at the library, volunteers on both sides stood outside all day every day, waving signs and lobbying voters.

On Saturday, the scene outside the Pat May Center resembled a tailgate party, with some supporters sitting outside motor homes.

The turnout easily beat Bedford's previous record in 1993, when 7,191 voters chose its first municipal judge.

IN THE KNOW

For rollback

- Early voting 3,396
- Election day 1,533
- Total 4,929

Against rollback

- Early voting 3,524
- Election day 1,395
- Total 4,919

SOURCE: City of Bedford, unofficial results

